

Forest Fires Ravage 3,000 Hectares in Himachal

Summer fires in Himachal's grasslands and forests have caused 378 incidents, mainly in the low hills, and destroyed flora and fauna in over 3,000 hectares, a senior forest official said on Monday.

But a major relief is store, with the state's weather department forecasting rain on Tuesday.

"The sudden rise in mercury and the prolonged dry spell are mainly the reasons for these forest fires. Most of the fire-related cases are from the Shivalik ranges in Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Kangra, Solan and Sirmaur districts and a majority of them are ground fires," Principal Chief Forest Conservator S.P. Vasudeva told *IANS*.

Records of the forest department said 22 percent or 8,267 sq.km of the total forest area in the state is fire-prone. A majority of the fires were reported from the pine forests since during summer, the trees shed pine needles that are highly inflammable due to the rich content of turpentine oil.

The pine forests are found up to an altitude of 5,500 feet.

Forest fires have also threatened the existence of the world heritage Kalka-Shimla rail line at several points near Dharampur town, 65 km from here.

"Both sides of the track were under fire but the fire was doused after some hours. The rail traffic was affected for sometime but now normal traffic has been restored," a senior Indian Railways official said.

The Kalka-Shimla rail track was built by the British in 1903 to ferry Europeans to and from this hill town, the erstwhile summer capital of British India. It was included in the Unesco List of World Heritage Sites in 2008.

A total of 671 fire incidents had destroyed 5,733 hectares of forests in 2015-16. The worst was 2012-13 when 1,798 fire incidents were reported and forest wealth on 20,763 hectares was destroyed.

Billowing smoke from the hills of Shimla, Kasauli, Chail, Dharampur and Nahan towns have become common these days.

"A huge track of forest in the Tara Devi hills (overlooking Shimla town) was ravaged in the past two days," villager Ramesh Chand told *IANS*.

The Met Office in Shimla said there could be light to moderate rain or thundershowers on Tuesday and thereafter.

"Rain and thundershowers are likely to occur over mid and low hills of the state during the next three days," an India Meteorological Department official told *IANS*.

He said most of the prominent tourist destinations like Shimla, Dharamsala, Palampur, Manali, Kasauli, Kufri, Narkanda and Dalhousie are likely to witness intermittent rainfall till May 5, which will douse forest fires too.

Shimla recorded the season's hottest day on Monday with maximum temperature at 29.8 degrees Celsius, seven notches above the average, the official said, blaming the unusually high temperatures on lack of rain.

Forest officials said most forest fire incidents were deliberate acts. The villagers also tend to set grasslands afire to get softer grass after the rains. In most cases, the fire from grasslands spreads to nearby forests.

Vasudeva said self-help groups mainly comprising villagers have been formed in the fire-prone districts.

"Besides self-help groups, more than 3,000 fire watchers have been deployed to check fire incidents," he said.

Leaves of forest employees have been cancelled till June 30.

He said the residents are also involved by the forest department to collect pine needles, a major cause of forest fires.

The villagers are collecting the needles and selling them to cement companies at Rs.1.65 per kg.

"We will try to negotiate with the cement firms to make the collection of pine needles lucrative by increasing their procurement rates to Rs.2 per kg," he said, adding the harvesting of needles is greatly helping checking forest fires.

According to official records, 66 per cent of the Himalayan state is under forest cover.

The lush green valleys and snow-capped mountains of the state are home to 36 per cent of India's species of birds. Of the 1,228 species reported in India, 447 have been recorded in Himachal.

Similarly, 77 species of mammals have been recorded by the Himachal State Council for Science, Technology and Environment.